

# A Caribbean Reading of American Cultural Idealism Kamau Brathwaite's Poetry Meets Claudia Rankine's Lyricism

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**Abstract** In *Middle Passages*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetic discourse propels the reader through the landscape of a postmodern American society where the cultural achievements, despite the historical suffering of modern African American people, are regathered and offered through the poetic lens of *re-memory* as an American artifact of excelling cultural value. In this paper, Brathwaite's poetic discourse joins that of Claudia Rankine, whose *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* offers a contemporary poetic confrontation between the American media's distillation of history and the poetic *re-memory* of those events, through the eyes of the Black community. The collections maintain strong political overtones in their historicizing of the suffering that African peoples have endured wherever they are in the black diaspora. Read together, they challenge the mythological depictions of mainstream America as a nation that embraces cultural difference, while upholding the need for continuing a discourse that contests mainstream representations of the status quo of the black American community.

**Keywords** Kamau Brathwaite. Claudia Rankin. Middle Passage. Black American literature. Memory.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 *Middle Passages: A Memorialisation of Black American Identity*. – 3 *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: History and Identity at the Limits of Social Engagement*. – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Caribbean poets living in America have had a decades long history of struggling to embed themselves into the literary landscape of the American canon. Those who are successful to a moderate degree find themselves in anthologies which label them as African Americans, and in carefully select works that fit mainstream theories. On the other hand, recent acknowledgement of these poets by way of contemporary black diaspora studies reflect on the authenticity of their cultural offerings and point to the way they are largely concerned with the confrontation between the individual and the society in which they live. In this embattled site of modern Caribbean American poetics, the Caribbean connection seems to thin out, get lost or, at best, experience a transformation. A pertinent example lies in the poetry collections of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Claudia Rankine, who both carry the double identity as Caribbean and African American poets. While Rankine still lives in America, and Brathwaite has returned home to the Caribbean, their work can properly be read together as contemporary poets whose collections speak to diaspora concerns and issues.

Brathwaite's academic and poetic journeys have shuttled him back and forth between his home in the Caribbean, Africa, and North America. Ever the historian, Kamau Brathwaite has published poetic works that have always been concerned with the history of the black community, highlighting important cultural events that have shaped or been shaped by their presence and creativity. In a different way, Claudia Rankine's collections also show the communal space of the black diaspora as a site of struggle for the minority individual, whose very existence is at risk. Both poets are concerned with affirming identity and selfhood as integral to their poetic discourse. A reading of Brathwaite's *Middle Passages* (1993) alongside Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), through the poetic device of *re-memory*, in Toni Morrison's sense of the word, transports readers across time and space. It serves as a recording of the poets' insistence on remembering the sacrifice of lives, the price paid for negotiating our modern-day existence.

In *Middle Passages*, Brathwaite's poetic discourse propels the reader through the landscape of a postmodern American society where the modern generation of African American people are represented as a group of minority Americans, suffering in a land which has been built on the proclamation of liberty and equality for all. Brathwaite's discourse on human suffering joins that of Claudia Rankine whose contemporary poetic collections are strident in their call for social change. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine's discourse confronts historical events that, under the powerful forces of *re-memory*, serve to create a docudrama of the horrors that minority groups in Amer-

ica face daily. Readers come to realize that nothing is safe anymore from the machinations of mainstream social media; not the individual self, not even one's death. As a combined collection, Brathwaite and Rankine's poems are relentless in their confrontation with the way the dominant culture in American society creates cultural myths that help to maintain its status quo as the real America.

## 2 Middle Passages: A Memorialisation of Black American Identity

Brathwaite's *Middle Passages* recalls his *Rights of Passage* collection published two decades earlier. In the latter, Brathwaite's poetic discourse on the effects of the Middle Passages of slavery on peoples of the black diaspora anthologizes their search for home and identity, creating a presence for this community in world literature that counterpoints their absence in the conventional pages of world history. The poetry collection represents the peoples of African descent as a people, not slaves of white dominated societies, and it questions the legitimization of slavery through the political processes of capitalism. Taking a step ahead in *Middle Passages*, Brathwaite's poetic discourse carries the reader decades forward into a postmodern American society.

The *Middle Passages* collection is composed of fourteen poems which, when read together, create a montage of history documenting the lived experiences of African American people, a people whose presence is largely erased from conventional historical and legal documents. The poetpersona in Brathwaite's *Middle Passages* (1992) travels across the black diaspora from North America to the Caribbean, creating a psycho-dramatic landscape that reflects on the process of identity formation, as it transforms through various historical moments of oppression and injustice. Brathwaite composes the poems so that they start out as praise poems glorifying the cultural artistes of his time but underlying each movement of the poems the speech act of the poetpersona invokes anew the spirit of rebellion that fired the black community's response to the injustices that prevailed. Commenting on the poetic composition of Brathwaite's work, including *Middle Passages*, Joan Dayan speaks to the poet's representation of history, "through relics, through tokens or trappings of past histories" (Dayan 1994, 728). Dayan points out, also, the politically infused language that drives his work, saying: "Brathwaite knows that resistance lies in naming the gods, reclaiming the bodies, repeating but also re-defining history" (728). "Repeating but re-defining history" is the job of the Caribbean poet whose compulsion lies in naming the thing into being in order to qualify its *raison d'être*.

*Middle Passages*, in effect, creates a memorialization of the events that have shaped black identity in the postmodern world of the post-

World War II generation. The poet's linguistic sleight of hand wields the pen as he beats the drums of Africa alongside the stringed instruments of the modern jazz band, creating structural shape and form for the poems. The ever-present jazz musical trope in the poems foregrounds the "principle of repetition and difference," which calls to mind Henry Louis Gates' description of the "practice of intertextuality" in his discourse on the "black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g)" (Gates 1989, 82). Gates' discussion speaks of the relation of identity inscribed in the use of the African American words 'signify' and 'signification' and their English homonyms, and he cites the importance of the "repetition of a word with a change denoted by a difference in sound" and of the "ambiguity" this difference creates, that is "the play of differences generated by the unrelated concepts, the 'signifieds', for which they stand" (Gates 1989, 45). Brathwaite's poetry collection shares moments that are used to signify the cultural erasure of black history and the poet's will to re-inscribe the 'signified' presence, and this becomes a heuristic blueprint for all the poems in this collection.

The musical form of Brathwaite's poetic composition complements the poetic construction of language in *Middle Passages*, as Brathwaite intentionally creates a saturation of music and speech, the one dependent on the other in the process of producing the individual poems. Additionally, the poems' structural doubling creates a collage effect on the musical composition, similar to Michael Jarrett's discussion of "jazz *satura*" (Jarrett 1999, 31). According to Jarrett's use of the term, *satura* describes the mix of musical generic forms that constitute the "founding image" of jazz (31). No doubt, for experienced readers, *satura* also holds echoes of the word *saturation*, which Stephen Henderson uses in his discussion of African American poetry. In general, *saturation* describes the insistence with which the work communicates a quality of blackness, through its use of black cultural forms - music, speech, dance, and art. As the rest of this paper shows, in the poetic construction of language in *Middle Passages*, Brathwaite intentionally creates a saturation of music and speech, the one dependent on the other in the process of making meaning.

The opening poem "Word Making Man" is dedicated to Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. The poet uses it to highlight the political intent of his own work, which rejects the false mythologies of America as a land of the brave and free. The title creates a foreshadow that refers to Guillén as political activist and poet, Guillén being the first representative of *poesia negra* (black poetry) in Cuba. The menace is picked up in the fourth stanza of the poem, where Brathwaite's poetpersona aligns himself with Guillén as he declares: "But i know that we are watching in a long circle for the dawn | & that the ruling class does not wait at bus stops | & I know that we are watching in a long circle for the fire" (3). The slow steady cadence of the speak-

ing voice invokes memories of historical abuse and injustice against the black communities, in the Caribbean, in Latin America, and important to the present moment of the poem, in the land of America where the poet resides.

Brathwaite uses his poetpersona in the poem to call for recognition of the role that the history of slavery has played in degrading the black diaspora. Setting the stage for the rest of the poems in the *Middle Passages* collection, it chants into being the names of people, places, and events in black history: “black little rock, the mau mau, emmet till | guevarra & the beaten skulls of biko & Lumumba” (5). The poetic chanting embeds the names in the readers’ memory, forcing us to remember the unspeakable atrocities that the names represent. The poetic string of names fingered like the beads of a rosary become an incantation or an invocation to cleanse the conscience of the nation: we remember the struggle against racial segregation in schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1954-57; the “mau mau” rebellion against colonial rule in Kenya, 1951-54; the history of violence in the American south embodied in the brutal murder of fourteen year old Emmet Till in 1955; the Cuban revolution against the Baptista regime, represented by Che Guevara, 1959-67; the fight against apartheid in South Africa, in the person of Stephen Bantu Biko, 1977; and finally, the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

All the poems in *Middle Passages* are heavily invested in transforming the history of negation and injustice that brands the black diaspora with shame. The interstices between music and memory create moments of rupture through which the poetic eye re-vision history from the perspective of the black diaspora in America. In “Duke: Playing Piano at 70” (21-8) the poem invokes the famous jazz musician, Duke Ellington, on several levels. First, the poem reminds readers of Ellington’s noteworthy contribution to American musical performing arts as the first jazz musician to create an elaborate performance composition that became an annual fare at the famous Carnegie Hall, beginning with the 1943 debut of his *Black, Brown and Beige* (Rohlehr 1981). Existing biographical records mark him also as receiving international accolades for his lifetime achievement in naming, recording, and contextualizing the lifetime experiences of his people (Stein Crease 1981). Second, it marks with ironic precision the disdain that Ellington garnered despite this accomplishment. Finally, but most important, Brathwaite’s own poem, in naming Ellington, comes into relation with Ellington’s music, so that as one they stretch forward in time in their dedication to telling and re-telling African American history, creating anew the contexts, and debunking the lies of mythical America.

A close examination of the poem “Duke: Playing Piano at 70” shows Brathwaite going beyond highlighting the cultural accomplishments

of the black community in America. Through its representation of a jazz performance by Ellington, the poem itself becomes a jazz performance, riffing on a melody that calls out moments of glory in the history of American music made by black musicians. The poetpersona recalls the opening moment of one performance:

The curtain psyching up  
& the lights swimming down into such sweet thunder of  
silence  
& each time is like that creak before birth (24)

What the musician's performance gives "birth" to is history, the distillation of lived experiences through the poetpersona's *re-memory* of communal history. Throughout the poem, the musicians are named individually, each name on its own line. The poem creates for each band member a presence that signifies the accomplishment of a community and defies the definitions that are color prescriptive within mainstream society.

Braithwaite's poem is composed like fragments of memory being awakened. In much the way Ellington gave recognition to individual band members, the poem's musical performance awakens memories of the talented black musicians in Ellington's band who, ironically, were featured at whites-only nightclubs in New York, during the Harlem Renaissance. In the poetpersona's description of Ellington's jazz performance, one fragment of the poem re-members Bessie Smith, the communally acclaimed "empress of the blues," who is described as bursting on the scene, under "Super Nova Headlights" (23), the words written in all caps. Readers hear again the signature chant as the poetpersona names the cities that Smith represents in her person, as one who has lived and experienced the atrocities that African Americans face on a daily basis. Bessie Smith's death, named in the poem, marks the death of many African Americans throughout history down to the time of her passing. Each city is given its own line space in the poem:

Watts  
St Louis  
Selma Alabama  
Chicago  
Montgomery Bus Boycott  
Cairo  
Where they most nearly kill you (23)

The line-up of names here represents the un/documented history of racism inflicted upon the community through the speaker's remembering not just of Bessie Smith, but of cities that have gone down in

history as strongholds of racism against blacks. It places her in multiple African American neighborhoods and cities over a period of time and includes the memory of her untimely death in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1937.

The poetpersona's invocation of "Watts" in the poem becomes a litany of name calling which memorializes the well-known history of racial segregation and race riots that broke out in black neighborhoods across America. On August 11, 1965, race riots broke out in Watts, on the heels of a confrontation between a black motorist and a white policeman. The poetpersona's reference to the place thereby recalls the economic poverty that haunted its inhabitants and the frequent incidents of police brutality and racism which marked the city as a hostile and violent place to African Americans. For the poetpersona, the memory of Watts triggers a recalling of other riots all over the United States of America, from North to South: Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama, 1965; the Chicago riots, 1968; and the earlier Montgomery bus boycott, 1955-56. The city of Cairo in the poem bridges past and present, Cairo being the capital of ancient Egypt and the name of the modern city in Illinois, USA. Its naming invokes the history of slavery in Egypt and the African diaspora, thereby re-defining the history of edgy racism and violent lynching against black people who stood their ground for civil liberties in postmodern times in the American city of Cairo, Illinois, USA.

Shifting grounds poetically, Brathwaite uses this fragment of "Duke: Playing Piano at 70" also to create a memorialization of African American leaders like Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King whose political influence is still felt today, in postmodern American society, some fifty years and more beyond Bessie Smith's time. In a dramatic re-enactment of American racism against Jackson, civil rights activist and Baptist minister, candidate for the Democratic presidential nominations in 1984 and 1988, the poetpersona recalls Jackson's personal and political struggles:

**run** Jesse **run**  
Jesse **run** Jesse  
**run** (24)

The verb "run" is in bold typeface, marking the daring act of political will as well as the urgency of the threats against his life and the need to act with perspicacity. The poetpersona recalls the hurting taunts he faced throughout his lifetime, his political career no exception: "*you're nothin. you're from no. | body | 3<sup>rd</sup> class servant class got-no-class under-class*" (24). The italic script marks the repeated jeers against Jackson who was stigmatized from birth by being born out of wedlock and alludes to his famous speeches in which he recited the "I Am - Somebody"

poem, which was written by William Holmes Borders in the fifties.<sup>1</sup>

Toward the end of this poetic fragment recalling Jackson's activism, the poetpersona aligns his life's mission with that of his contemporaries, emphasizing the need to "keep hope alive of the right to continue the dream | about our rightful place at the table" (24). Under the powerful force of *re-memory*, his invocation of Jackson's political speeches, becomes one with Martin Luther King's powerful "I Have a Dream" speech and Langston Hughes' poem "I Too," offering a vision that is embraced by the entire black community in America, a vision for which King was eventually assassinated. Placing Hughes' poem within the poetic line draws readers attention to the power of the poetic word, that it could then become a striking foreshadow of the field of twenty first century American politics. The poetic fragment ends with a commentary on the effect that these memories have on the poetpersona (and the readers by extension). He says:

The curtain psyching up  
& the lights swimming down into such sweet thunder of  
silence  
& each time each time is like that creak before birth. (24-5)

The imagery in these lines powerfully enacts a moment of recognition and revelation, apropos to a moment of epiphany. It dramatically challenges and transforms history, lifting the "curtain" of darkness, or bracing up the mind in preparation for ("psyching up") the historic moment that calls forth a new identity. The poem in itself becomes a transforming and transfixing moment in history.

Brathwaite's memory of Ellington's jazz performances clearly becomes a living force, a catharsis that releases the distillation of history throughout the poem. His reference to "the old man's hands," repeated with jazz variations throughout the poem, is a poetic strategy that swings the reader from one moment in history to another. Recalling and re-aligning these moments, the poem thereby contests conventional records that erase or otherwise negate the powerful influence of African American singers, musicians, dancers, and political ambassadors in the American halls of fame. The poetpersona describes Ellington's musical performance as a majestic act of re-creation. As the elderly musician "plays the tune," being remembered (26), his hands are seen "striding through the keyboard sidewalks alleyways & ages" (27); he effortlessly and masterfully brings together in that one act the community of African Americans at all levels. The poem ends with a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Honoring the Legacy of Rev. Dr. Williams Holmes Borders and the Borders Family." *Sweet Auburn Works*. URL <http://www.sweetaurnworks.com/honoring-the-legacy-of-rev-william-holmes-borders-the-borders-family/> (2019-11-27).



final description of Ellington's hands as he might have performed at Carnegie Hall, with youthful vigor. The poetpersona recalls:

His hands are playing every Tricky Nanton book in town  
black black Black Bottom stomp  
diminuendo honey beige & hallelujah brown (28)

Just as Brathwaite's musical performance brands the present moment with the sounds of the past, the jazz structure of the poem allows him to create a montage of black history that defies ignoring.

The poem presents each musician/singer/artist associated with a city or cities, each city a living witness to and a condemnation of the atrocities endured by generations of black people everywhere. In musical fashion the poetpersona recalls too the politically salient moments in African American history through his *re-memory* of those who like Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King refused to be discounted or not counted at all. Both "Word Making Man" and "Duke: Playing Piano at 70" carry the signal reminder that marks all of Brathwaite's collections: the sublimation of the voice of the living persona for that of the dead ancestor who joins him in mourning the attacks against racial pride and heritage, as well as celebrating the cultural achievements of the African American community. In each poem, the poetpersona's voice becomes one with the voice of the dead musicians and artistes he recalls, whose performances join his to become the living voice of history.

Powerful as it is, Kamau Brathwaite's *Middle Passages* collection is not singular in its achievement but is part of a communal reckoning taking place in black communities of the Caribbean diaspora today. The American community of Caribbean poets are ever conscious of the double standards that apply across borderlines. Their poetic re-remembering of American lived experiences are tinged with ironic revelations of the true state of affairs in American society. In conversation, therefore, with Brathwaite's *Middle Passages*, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is relentless in its confrontation with the way the dominant culture in American society creates cultural myths that help to maintain its status quo. Rankine's American lyric collection demonstrates the urgency, and sets about fulfilling its own demand, for a new poetics that can properly record the cultural malaise that endangers all humanity.

### **3 Don't Let Me Be Lonely: History and Identity at the Limits of Social Engagement**

Three years before publishing *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Claudia Rankine's third collection of poetry, *Plot* (2001), was released. The latter

collection creates a record of the poet's preoccupation with the signifying moment in the life of the individual, whereby the poetic proclivity to naming and identifying recontextualizes the experience of the wider black community. From the opening fragment of *Plot*, the reader can see that the poet's thrust is to create a body, literally, for her new poetry. As she struggles to gain access to a pre-verbal conception of self, the autobiographical persona carves images with surgical precision, invoking and re-membering all the parts of the conventional poetic discourse of identity. The "birth" of this new poetic body has left a "signifying" mark on the walls of literary history and this new poetic discourse is further re-configured in Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.

Driven by the poetic force of *re-memory*, the poet creates a mosaic of events that serves to reconstruct, even re-align, the conventional records of mainstream media. The first page of the collection positions a comment from Aimé Cesairé as epigraph at the top of the page. The quote from Cesairé encourages active participation in life, in the making of history. In Rankine's text, it speaks to the danger of complacency and unquestioning acceptance which accompany the media's propagation of the lived experience so that it becomes mere spectacle for the American audience. The signature blank spaces at the bottom of the epigraph merges with the blank spaces three pages over, where there is nothing but space and the photo of a television set at the bottom of the page. This deliberate manipulation of space and technology creates an opening for questioning the familiar medium of communication in every American household. It nudges readers into assuming a conscious frame of mind as they view Rankine's poetic docudrama of life, aligning them with the autobiographical poetpersona who contests the media's representation of contemporary history.

*Don't Let Me Be Lonely* speaks on a dying American society and it is laced with cynicism. In the first fragment following the epigraph, the poetpersona explains that the experience of death or dying was personally alienating to her from as far back as childhood, and the third grade in school. She says: "people only died on | television - if they weren't Black" (5). Rankine's poetpersona is making the point that the media socializes the collective black individual to experience "death" as a spectacle for the entertainment of the American household; perhaps, "death", as an experience, is only real when it is fed by the media and becomes an event worthy of mention, as a happening or a fact. Another childhood memory in the same fragment counterpoints this idea. She notes that there was something distant and foreign about the experience of death even when a family member died, as in the case of the death of her father's mother who lived "back home" in Jamaica. Struck by her father's "aloneness", she says, "I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get", and then

she explains: "His mother was dead. I'd never met her. It meant a trip back home for him. When he returned he spoke neither about the airplane nor the funeral" (5). The alienation the child experiences is brought about partly by her growing up in America, away from her "home" in the Caribbean. As a child she was thus taught that death is a part of the natural experience of living. You cross the bridge in between and move on without public displays of grief.

The suggestion in this poetic fragment, early in the collection, is that death is a doubly alienating experience for the black child growing up in America. The television coverage of funerals excludes the black individual, and within the family it is inscribed as a private event. They do not share in the communal experiences of living and dying that are represented by the lens of mainstream history. In the poetic collection, the loneliness of the individual becomes a symptom that marks him/her as already dead or dying. The poet brings together narrative and lyric fragments of experiences that serve to represent the psychic disorientation which haunts the poetpersona who sees signs of death, violence, and destruction around her, and refuses to sit back as mere spectator.

The death of the collective individual in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* speaks gruesomely about a society that has already died. Conversations in passing; personal interactions with friends, colleagues, neighbors; immediate thoughts and musings that follow televised accounts of social, political and historical happenings in America; all serve as more than setting or context. They are catalyst for the poetic discourse. The poetic fragments go back and forth between the inner and outer consciousness of the poetpersona whose refusal to take a spectator position, as encouraged by Césaire, marks the life changing events unfolding in contemporary American society. They move relentlessly forward in a cinematic roll, recreating televised snapshots of news accounts and documentary, forcing the reader to review them critically, see them anew first as fragments and then as a collective whole. It is hard to drag the eye away from the photoscreen as she creates her mosaic of grief that by intent either outrages or shocks the reader into becoming active participant in the events, personal and historical, that are replayed by the poetic account.

Rankine makes no pretence that her poetic re-collection of memory in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is intentionally political. The introductory 20 pages (of this 131-page book) give the impression of the poetpersona's mental rambling, a seemingly inconsequential mutter, but one page over, readers come face to face with the political subtext: the death and dying of the marginalized black community. A few pages into the collection, she takes issue with the media's complicity in creating a culture of paralysis, through its dissemination of what the collection criticizes as "the American fantasy" of life (25). She criticizes this wholesale production of cultural paralysis highlighting the

complacency with which individuals become mere spectators. Noting the mindlessness that afflicts viewers, the poetpersona explains: “we can just lie back, close our eyes, and relax”; postponing the moment when we start living because the television allows us to choose the channel we want, knowing that “[our] life is waiting” (24-9). Her sarcasm marks her rejection of the attitude, subliminally imposed by the media-driven society, which allows individuals to step safely around sociopolitical issues as if they don’t exist, or as if they don’t personally apply.

The subconscious telemessages carry the awareness that history is filled with examples of a lack of humanity in a world that claims to be humane, a world that does not care. There is an undercurrent of sadness that fuels this poetic discourse; a sadness that is experienced as a life sentence to death in the body of the poetpersona. Rankine proclaims: “Cornel West makes the point that hope is different from American optimism” (21), and she then uses West’s comment as a platform for launching her own criticism of the Bush Presidency, a time when Americans were in the “throes of our American optimism,” she says (21). The poet’s memory of a televised death of a black man who was brutally lynched in 1998, creates the opportunity for her to make direct reference to the political manoeuvring of the president, as he offers a guarded response to this event on national television. At the bottom of the page, and on the following page, the poet posts three graphic images representing media photos of the day, including a photo of the victim, James Byrd Jr., an African-American who “was murdered by three white supremacists, in Jasper, Texas, on June 7, 1998” (Boyd 2018).<sup>2</sup> His was a grisly murder and it was reported on by prominent news media of the day, CNN and Fox News among them, yet, in the televised account, president Bush said that he could not remember “if two or three people were convicted” in this case. “*You don’t know because you don’t care,*” the poetpersona says aloud, “to the television screen,” speaking, she says, with the authority of her mother’s voice, as it “swells and fills [her] forehead” (21). In the reference to “the authority of her mother’s voice,” the poet aligns her voice with the voices of her maternal ancestry, the voice of the black woman who speaks out and speaks truth without apology.

Rankine’s use of the poetic device of *re-memory* in this poetic fragment allows her poetpersona to experience a multiplicity of voices speaking all at once through her, and she offers this performance as a way of validating that the personal is communal experience. The voice of Cornel West, renown African American author and social critic, acts as a trigger in this instance. Reaching back to earlier memo-

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<sup>2</sup> Burch, Audra, “In Texas, a Decades -Old Hate Crime, Forgiven but Never Forgotten”, *New York Times*, July 9, 2018.

ries of the poet's Caribbean mother chiding her daughter for her inattentiveness to important details, the voices move forward to merge and find embodiment through the voice of the poet, and she tells us that this embodied voice "takes on a life of its own: *You don't know because you don't bloody care. Do you?*" it asks (22). Together they speak as one authorizing force, as the poetpersona lashes out, anger and sadness becoming one: "the sadness" she explains, "lives in the recognition that a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, [...] that billions of lives never mattered" (23).

*Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, proceeds to call to memory the untimely deaths of billions of lives that matter to the poet. In the thirty pages that follow her Bush account, she represents the American society as a community of the already dead or dying, under the influence of mainstream American television, which becomes the baby sitter of the nation and the purveyor of drug induced fantasies. With ironic humor she points out the false sense of control it gives to viewers, suggesting that they can choose life, any life they want by changing the channel: "YOUR LIFE IS WAITING" says the television screen, which image she posts at the bottom of page 29. The irony she points out is that the sleepless billions who depend for life on the pharmaceutical companies are further targeted by these very companies via the nightly television commercials which seduces them into a drug induced paralysis. "They advertise in the middle of the night," the poetpersona tells us, "when people are less distracted and capable of tuning in more and more | and most precisely to their fearful bodies and their accompanying anxieties" (29). In between fragments of her words on the page are photographic images of prescription labels with their warning of danger clearly visible. These commercial representations of everyday life mark for readers the alienation and the mindlessness that has overtaken the American society, making them easy prey for the state of panic and terror that eventually took America by surprise during the 9/11 attack. Fragment by fragment, like photographic stills, a society filled with paranoia unravels before readers. They are lulled into a state of paralysis, sitting passively before the television screen throughout the day.

Creating a poetic recounting of televised docudrama, the poetpersona transports readers through time barriers and across the cultural geodivide that has become America and memorializes deaths of socially insignificant individuals within the black community. The female body as receptacle for pain dominates this horrifying retailing of history, as it is archived not just by the media resources, but in the physical embodiment of the poetpersona herself. The memory of events has existed long before they are televised, in the pain she has always experienced and which she describes graphically: "Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form of a blow to the body [...] Sometimes I look into someone's

face and I must brace myself – the blow on its way.” (56) The reader feels the “blow on its way” as Rankine’s poetic fragments, become a chain of memory, fingering the beads of history, naming the participants and victims like litany.

In her memorializing of Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo that follows, the poet reviews news media accounts of the violence and injustice visited upon black men who are outsiders to mainstream American community (Mac Donald 1999).<sup>3</sup> The televised interview of Louima, the black thirty-year-old Haitian man who was “sodomized with a broomstick” by New York City police in 1997 (56), is forever embedded in her brain and ours as we watch the television with her. The italics on the page replay the sound of Louima’s words as he answers the interviewer saying:

*“I hope what comes out of my case is change. What happened to  
me  
should not happen to any human being, to my children  
or anybody else’s children...”* (56)

The photoimage of the televised event splices the words on the page, from victim to spectator/participant as the poetpersona takes up the narrative retailing the history of shame and pain. The shame lies in what has been done to the victim, but the greater shame is in the nation’s refusal to acknowledge his pain; that the reporter could look at the man and speak of the riches he has gained because of the “8.7 million dollars” he received in settlement; that he could overlook the pain.

The poetic image closing this painful memory speaks volumes to communal experience as the poetpersona, unable to remain bland spectator says: “Instinctively my hand braces my abdomen” (56). The body imagery in the poem marks the communal memory of the pain and shame of centuries of enslavement and human injustice borne within the body of the poet. Her reaction is instinctive. It reminds the reader of a Caribbean saying passed down through generations of African descent, in the words of a Jamaican poet: “mi ban mi belly an mi bawl” (Mikey Smith). The memory of Louima’s experience opens the poetpersona to another, that of Amadou Diallo, the unarmed, twenty-three-year-old black man from Guinea, West Africa, who was shot down in cold blood by city police, two years later in 1999 (57). Speaking of the forty-one shots he fired at him the poet persona mourns: “All the shots, all forty-one never add up, never become plural, and will not stay in the past” (57). Again, the poetic fragment lingers on a

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**3** Jenkins, Nicol et al., “Twenty Years Later, pain of NYPD’s Heinous Attack on Abner Louima Remains”, *New York Daily News*, August 9, 2017.

photoimage of another televised screen, this one showing Diallo, relaxed, smiling into the camera, and the poetpersona scrutinizes her own reaction, wondering what it means that she can “feel loss to the point of being bent over each time” (57).

Rankine’s meditation on these events confirm her recognition of the need to speak out, to speak truth, to awaken the social conscience of the nation. The narrative fragment recalling these unjust deaths point out that “the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space [...] to hold the pain, and then to translate it here” and then she says, “what alerts, alters” (57). The narrative fragment ends with a lyrical poem on death and loneliness, in which the poetpersona rejects the idea of sitting back as spectator and refusing to think and feel. The poem speaks of the pain of feeling, of “not not feeling,” comparing it to being “like dying” (58) and of the “loneliness” that is worse than death.

#### 4 Conclusion

Examining the relationship between the world of art and the art of writing the lived experience, Rankine’s collection of poems poses questions so that readers will at the very least acknowledge them. At key moments throughout the collection, the poetpersona draws readers into a moment of self-scrutiny with her, in which she examines her reasons for writing about death and loneliness as an individual experience that marks the social crisis of twenty first century America. She carefully and deliberately delineates an American landscape that reflects her passion for America and her increasing distress in the state of paralysis that has overtaken society. Asked about her “relationship” with the landscape which she offers in her poetic docudrama, Rankine responds:

I believe that where we are, how we are allowed to live, is determined by the politics of the land – the big politics and the little politics. And it varies depending on where you’re located. I’m very interested in the landscape in general as the site of living, of a place created out of lives, and those lives having a kind of politics and a kind of being that is consciously and unconsciously shaped. Decisions are made that allow us to do certain things, that give us certain freedoms and “unfreedoms”. (Rankine 2009)

The Caribbean texture/sensibility of Rankine’s work is felt in its appropriation of the cultural space of the borderlands. In Jill S. Kuhnheim’s discussion on Caribbean poetry where she speaks of the Caribbean borderlands, she invokes Arjun Appadurai’s definition of culture as “an arena for conscious choice, justification, representation” and

adds the injunction that such representation is often made to “multiple and spatially dislocated audiences” (Kuhnheim 2008, 135). Rankine’s *Don’t Let me be Lonely* appeals to residents of the borderlands and they are not limited by national or regional identity but include all who are socially inscribed as outsiders because of racial identity.

In the closing pages of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* the poetpersona says, “I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness” (129) and she speaks of the way the “world,” tends to ignore what they (readers anywhere they are) refuse to acknowledge. Rankine’s poetpersona laments that the world “move[s] through words as if the bodies / the words reflect did not exist” (129). Rankine offers the collection of poems in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* as a handshake, a gesture that affirms the individual’s dignified presence. Citing Paul Celan’s theoretical discourse on poetry, as translated by Rosemary Waldrop, Rankine explains, “The handshake is our decided ritual of asserting (I am here) and hand- / ing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that-Here. I am here. [...] Here both recognizes and demands recognition” (Waldrop in Celan 1990, 131-2).

With a different sense of purpose, Brathwaite’s *Middle Passages* insists on celebrating black cultural achievements, as it highlights the underlying social injustices, a point that his invocation of Guillén in this volume drives home to readers. Guillén is not only a revolutionary Cuban poet, but also one whose poetic agenda brings him into community with the wider black diaspora. Brathwaite’s “Word Making Man” is intentionally used to open the *Middle Passages* collection to create the call both for celebration of black poetics in America and recognition of the history of sacrifice and suffering which overshadows the black community. Commenting on the relation between Brathwaite’s collection and Guillén’s, John Hyland makes the point that Brathwaite’s work is “demonstrating the possibilities of a global black diaspora poetics that emerges out of Atlantic violence, out of legacies of colonialism and practices of imperialism” and he calls it, “a poetics that not only critiques but also imagines modes of transformation and belonging” (Hyland 2017, 88).

Despite generational differences, both Brathwaite and Rankine are engaged with a communal drive to share black cultural history as it is lived and experienced by those within their community. As this discussion of their work has shown, the poetic collections maintain a strong political overtone in their intent to move beyond the incipient creation of this history to a historicizing of the suffering that African peoples have had to endure wherever they are in the black diaspora. Unafraid, the poets challenge the dominant racist ideology of a society that creates mythological depictions of America as a nation that welcomes outsiders and embraces cultural difference. Together, they offer the gift of the handshake, the cultural offering of their poetic collections, in the hope that readers will reach out a



hand to receive that gift with its intended sense of goodwill, a gift not sought but yet extended.

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